

Physical History

1790-1897

The following historical account is based primarily on the work of Prothero and Tepper in their report, "Landscape Overview: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial", completed in May of 1996.

The Native Americans that inhabited the lower Potomac Valley during the eighteenth century are described by Dr. Stephen R. Potter in his book "Commoners, Tribute and Chiefs, the Development of the Algonquian Culture in the Potomac Valley." According to Potter, the Native Americans utilized this area, then part of "Tuber Creek" (as shown in the L'Enfant Plan of 1792) in many different ways. Tiber Creek, originally called Goose or Tuber Creek, was appropriately named since the estuary served as a stopping point for migratory waterfowl and the marshes supported many plant tubers. These wild roots were gathered for food during the summer months, while waterfowl including swans, cranes, geese, ducks and mallards, provided nourishment during the autumn and winter. Due to its marshy topography, however, occupation of the Potomac Valley was restricted to the higher ground, such as that later chosen for the site of the Washington Monument. In addition, a hunting and gathering culture as opposed to a semisedentary agricultural community would have been dominant in the area because the hard silty clays were not conducive to slash and burn subsistence cultivation (interview Potter, Feb 8, 1983 in Prothero and Tepper, 77).

In 1791, Washington D.C. was chosen by Congress at their meeting in Philadelphia as the site for the capital city. It was to be fourteen miles from George Washington's home at Mount Vernon, at the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. Most of the land was covered by dense forests, flood plain and rural farmland, with three towns - Georgetown, Bladensburg and Alexandria—forming a triangle around the relatively flat area where the rivers converged.

Responsibility for the design of the new city was given to Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, together with two other city commissioners. Jefferson traveled widely in Europe, studying famous cities to gather ideas for the new capital. His own first sketch shows his approach to urban planning along the unimproved shoreline of the river. The President's house and the Capitol, located on the high ground and linked by promenades, providing views down the Potomac River, illustrate his understanding of the principles of Baroque eighteenth century urban design. Yet even with Jefferson's and others' relative expertise, the engagement of a professional town planner became a necessity. George Washington, president of the newly formed United States, chose the French engineer officer, Pierre Charles L'Enfant. L'Enfant's plan shows his intended changes to the river's edge and the positioning of important elements on axis in the central mall area commanding views over the Potomac to the west and south. George Washington, at once a visionary and a pragmatist, envisioned that the new city would develop as a major port with associated river commerce. Both the Washington (1815) and the Chesapeake and Ohio (1828) canals were built to accomplish this feat.

Though siltation of the Potomac River had always been a seasonal occurrence, with the deforestation and increase of farming activities upstream, came an increase of silt deposits. Debris from upstream was carried and deposited in the shallow tidal areas around the developing city. Building projects, grading of streets and an increasing population of the city also resulted in deposits into the river to such an extent that parts of the river were impassable for commerce. As early as 1833, engineers proposed to remove the silt by dredging the river. In 1857 civil engineer Alfred Landon Rives submitted plans to reclaim 166 acres of mudflats near Long Bridge. Long Bridge, constructed in 1809, was the first bridge to have

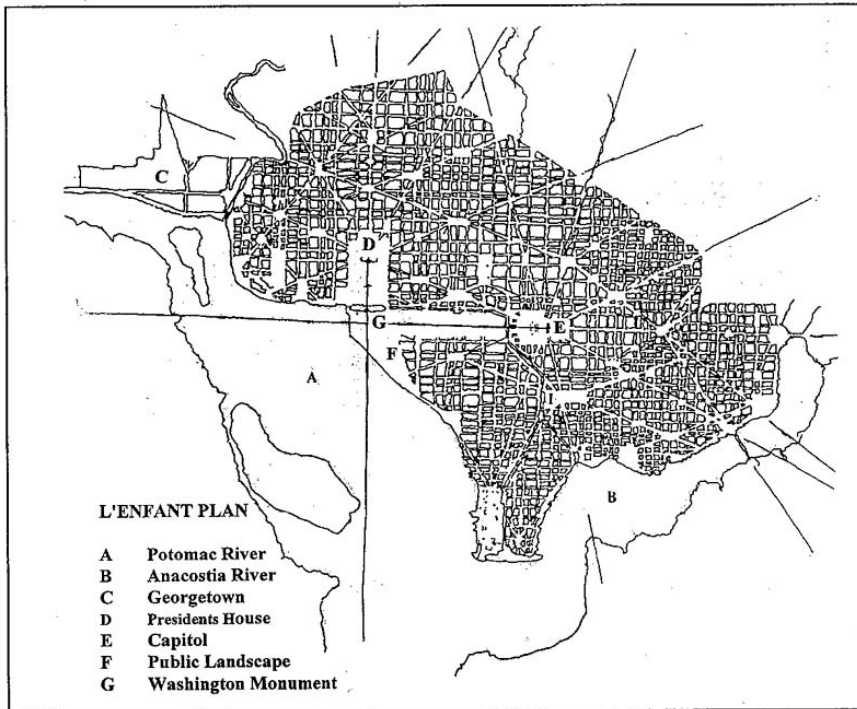
been built across the river in this area, occupying the same position as today's 14th St. Bridge. In order to help relieve the over-use of Long Bridge, Congress decided to build a second bridge—seventy-five feet downstream. Subsequently, the area between the bridges became so silted that it became known as "Potomac Flats", supporting a number of salt water grass species. In 1875 in an attempt to open the river to commerce, T. Abert from the Army Corp of Engineers, proposed to fill in Potomac Flats using the dredged silt from the reclamation operation to both reclaim land and to make the river navigable again. This work was continued by career Army officer, Major Hains, who replaced Abert in 1882. In his nine years of tenure, Hains completed the majority of dredging and reclamation. The area of reclaimed land totaled 600 acres in all, and was several feet above high tide and flood level. Two separate tracts of land were created. The most southerly was approximately two miles long and paralleled the old shoreline of the Potomac River, now known as East Potomac Park. The other, now known as West Potomac Park, was located to the west of the Washington Monument and separated Constitution Avenue (once B Street) from the water's edge. The fertility of the deposits upon these two areas caused a rapid growth of vegetation. Such rapid growth led to an increased need for maintenance and the suggestion that the land be better utilized.

Between the new island and the old shoreline lay the deepened channel, providing access to wharves and docks. To the north, the other fill area extended nearly a mile westward from the old water line which had reached almost to the foot of the Washington Monument. Hains had directed that between these two areas there should be a tidal basin, separated from the river and the channel by two sets of gates. This design allowed water to enter the basin at high tide through an opening from the Potomac. When the tide began to fall, water seeking to drain from the basin would force the inlet gates to shut and the outlet gate onto the Washington Channel to open, thus flushing it with relatively clean water with each change of tide.

In 1893, Hains's replacement, Major E. L. B. Davis, advocated the area's development as a public park, stating:

“The improvement has now reached a stage where some attention needs to be given to the maintenance and preservation of the reservation. The rich soil, of which the greater part of the reclaimed land is composed, induces and fosters a rapid growth of high weeds, willows, and other trees and underbrush, which, in the summer season especially, render access to the various parts of the work quite difficult. This growth should be cleared up each year, until the reservation is ready to be laid out, graded, and sown with grass seed,” (Chapell 1973, 30).

Despite the wishes of many people who wanted the land sold for private use, Congress passed Senate Bill No. 3,307 on March 3, 1897, which established the area of the Tidal Basin and former flats as a public park for the recreation and pleasure of the people (Prothero and Tepper, 5-9).



The L'Enfant Plan, 1792, shows the Mall opening to the Potomac River to the west and south.

1897-1934

Even as early as 1830, strict adherence to the L'Enfant plan in the design of the capital city had been abandoned. The Washington Monument had been built off-center from the White House's north-south axis, and the reconstructed Capitol rose above a mall that had become congested and spatially incoherent. The river's edge, which had previously adjoined the mall, was finally determined through the dredging and reclamation works. In 1901, in an effort to recapture the design intent of the earlier L'Enfant plan and in response to the enormous critical acclaim for the "White City" of the 1893 World Colombian Exhibition in Chicago, the McMillan Commission was appointed to study the layout of the city and develop a comprehensive plan for the Mall area, including Potomac Park.

In the McMillan Commission's plan, the layout of the Mall was converted from a urban composition characterized by open views of an infinite landscape to the south and west, to one enclosed by buildings with the five cardinal sites (the Capitol, White House, Washington Monument, Memorial Site and Lincoln Memorial Site) regulating the central layout and order. The designation of the north-south axis terminating in an as-yet unspecified monument site on the south shore of the Tidal Basin inevitably held great significance in the choice of a site for the Jefferson Memorial, thirty years later.

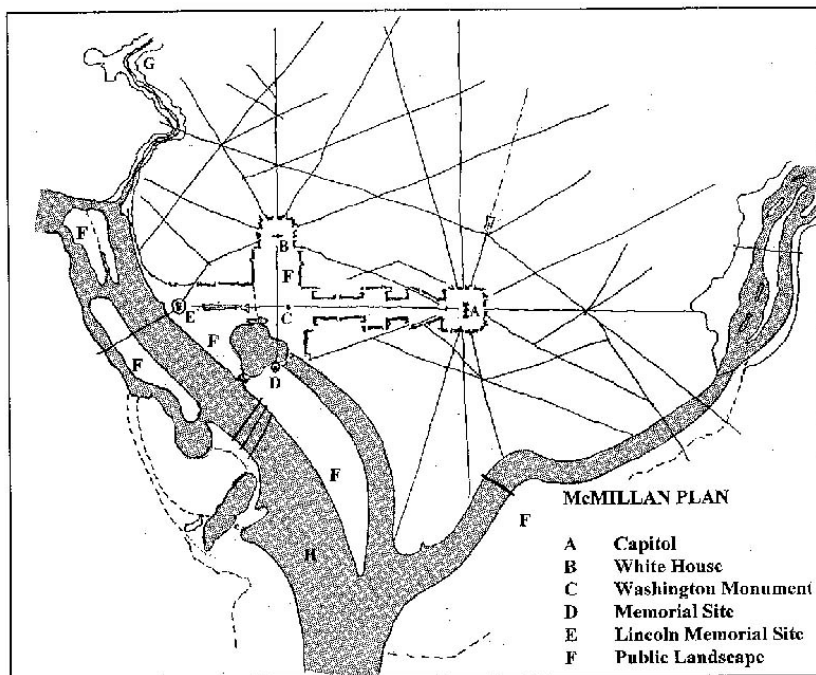
Work continued on raising the level of the land and, in 1901, thirty-one acres were transferred to the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, which organized the clearance of natural vegetation and graded the site, giving it a more tamed and controlled "park-like" appearance. They raised the Tidal Basin revetment wall, and built a forty-foot wide drive of macadam (layers of compacted crushed stone sprayed with tar, then rolled) along the east side of the reservoir. Between 1906 and 1908, a riverside drive was constructed from the foot of Seventeenth Street, southwest around the Tidal Basin to the inlet, and from the inlet north along the edge of the Potomac to 26th Street. Transportation to and from the site was also improved. A boat landing station was erected in the northwest corner of the Tidal Basin,

and cinder footpaths and bridle paths were laid out near the roadway. The drive was provided with brick gutters, drains, and catch-basins, and lined with 313 trees, primarily elms. By 1907 the entire perimeter of the Tidal Basin was accessible to the public who used the area for walking, driving and horseback riding.

A railroad bridge, which had been authorized by Congress in 1901 and built by the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Co. replaced the one situated at the northernmost point of East Potomac Park. Concurrently, the Secretary of War was authorized to build a highway bridge to the north of the railroad bridge. Both bridges, perceived as unsightly, were screened with trees in 1909 to make them less visible from the park. Forty-four poplars were planted near the Inlet Bridge to screen the highway and thirty-one poplars were installed near the railroad bridge (Kresscox Associates 1986, 45).

“George Brown, landscape gardener from the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, gave several suggestions for more satisfactory screening plants, in recognition of the fact that preservation of views would become more important as East and West Potomac Parks continued to be developed and used. Among his recommendations were poplars, tulip trees, ash, oriental planes, American elms, sweet gum, American linden and maples,” (Kresscox Associates 1986, 45).

There is no record revealing whether such a variety of vegetation was planted. Extensive planting on site continued however. Approach roads to both ends of the Inlet bridge were built early in 1910. Included in the construction package were 181 flowering shrubs and three trees which were planted on the western approach, and 365 flowering shrubs on the eastern approach. Fifty-three willow trees were added to those along the Potomac riverfront. The cherry trees, for which the area is probably most well known, were donated to the city by the Mayor of Tokyo in 1911 and planted in 1912. A total of 3,020 were planted in West Potomac Park in three locations: the Tidal Basin, East Potomac Park and the Washington Monument grounds.



The McMillan Plan illustrates the Mall as a kite-shaped plan, with buildings at the four points and center. The Potomac channel is narrower due to dredging and fill operations.

WASHINGTON HARBOR AND POTOMAC RIVER, SOUTH FROM MONUMENT, WASHINGTON, D. C.



South bank of the tidal basin prior to the construction of the Jefferson Memorial